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ABSTRACT

Higher demands on administrators have rendered traditional selection methods less adequate. Many schools have responded by adopting assessment centers to identify administrator qualifications. Previous research and contact with assessment centers through letters, phone calls, and a survey furnished the information for this study. Twenty-five of the 50 centers surveyed responded. In the United States, over 50 administrator assessment centers have been implemented by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) to select, place, and promote administrators. The exercises used in these centers incorporate 12 administrative skill dimensions and reveal prospective administrators' behavioral strengths and weaknesses. The exercises include group discussions, interviews, simulations, schedule-making, management games, written tests, public speaking, and negotiations. The training and effectiveness of assessors is crucial to the efficiency of assessment centers. According to studies conducted by the NASSP, relationships exist between assessment center scores and subsequent job performance and school climate. Financial obstacles to implementation can be avoided by operating the centers in schools during the summer; time consumption obstacles can be remedied through the computerization of scoring. Other benefits of assessment centers include the self-evaluation of assessors and assessees, improved observation skills, improved teacher evaluation, and the standardization of skill expectations. Thirty-seven references and four figures are included. (RG)

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# THE STATUS AND POTENTIAL FOR ADMINISTRATIVE ASSESSMENT CENTERS IN EDUCATION

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# THE STATUS AND POTENTIAL FOR ADMINISTRATOR ASSESSMENT CENTERS IN EDUCATION

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The process of selecting educational administrators is usually based on personal interviews, substantiation of completion of licensing requirements, recommendations, and documentation of prior experience. As expectations for performance on the part of educational administrators have increased, traditional selection processes have proven less and less adequate. To identify the abilities of candidates regarding the complex combination of qualities required for specific administrative positions, many school districts have adapted and implemented assessment centers, which have already proven highly effective for identifying and placing administrators in private industry.

Despite the use of the term "center" an assessment center is clearly not a place but an event. Frederick Wendel (1986) defines a "typical" assessment center as, " . . . a standard set of procedures and activities which are multiple in number and include one or more simulation exercises that are used to assess persons' behaviors for selection, placement, development, or

promotion, usually in managerial positions" (p. 43). This definition includes the most vital elements of assessment centers with the exception of the fact that it is necessary that these procedures be administered and evaluated by a trained group of assessors during a specified period of time.

The intent of the paper is to describe the present status of assessment center approaches in the field of education. In pursuit of this objective we will explore the development and early implementation of assessment centers, the purposes they are being used for in education, the skills they are designed to measure, the methods commonly used to measure these skills, and the training required of assessors. We will also summarize current validation studies, summarize the major problems that have been identified concerning assessment centers, and review potential uses, other than direct selection of administrators, for which assessment centers can be employed.

## Methods

The small but growing body of literature existing on assessment centers in education was reviewed. In addition, existing assessment centers were contacted by means of letters, telephone correspondence, and a brief survey. The survey, which included seven question areas, was sent to fifty assessment centers that were identified through information provided by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). Twenty-five (50%) of the centers contacted responded to the survey. Results of the survey appear as graphs in appropriate

sections of the paper. While the sample may not be representative of assessment centers which have been independently developed and implemented, the great majority of centers are operating under NASSP sanction.

## History of Assessment Centers

The following brief history should facilitate a better understanding of the development of assessment centers in education.

The concept of utilizing simulations to assess the behaviors of candidates for particular jobs was first explored by a group of German military psychologists in the 1930's. The improvements obtained in candidate selection were recognized by the British War Office Selection Board, which developed its own assessment center model to identify army officers during World War II. In the course of application by the Board, a number of significant improvements were made over the original German model.

In the 1940's, the U.S. Office of Strategic Services developed the first assessment center in the U.S. Although the USS center was only operational for a few years, some of the recommendations made by the staff have been adapted in other U.S. assessment center settings (MacKinnon, 1975).

Psychologists in industry recognized the value of employing this model. American Telephone and Telegraph, a pioneer in the field, developed an extensive, long-term study to ascertain applications and probable results of using assessment centers.

AT&T is one of the largest corporations using the assessment center for candidate selection and promotion. Other large corporations, including Standard Oil, Sears, IBM, General Electric, Caterpillar Tractor, Eastern Airlines, Ford Motors, General Motors, Pitney Bowes, 3M Corporation, Merrill Lynch, Pierce Fenner and Smith, are also using some form of the assessment center in their personnel selection process.

Assessment centers are being employed in government agencies and private industries throughout the world. (Wendel and Sybouts, undated) In the U.S. they are widely employed in government agencies. At the federal level the State Department and the Federal Aviation Agency make extensive use of the assessment method for personnel selection. The U.S. armed forces, particularly the Army, have expressly designed assessment programs for officer candidates. It is also used by federal agencies that select administrative judges who adjudicate disputes between federal agencies and private contractors. In some states and cities the assessment center method is being used for purposes such as selection of police officers and law enforcement personnel.

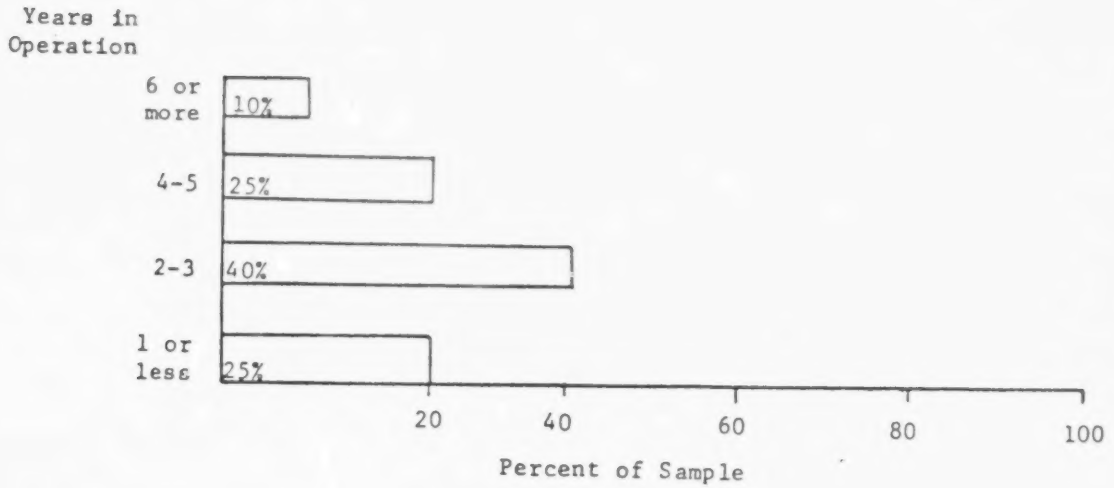
The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), recognizing the need to identify and develop potentially strong educational administrators, worked with the American Psychological Association to formulate a plan which led to the development of the NASSP's Assessment Center Project in 1975. There are now more than 50 member organizations which serve school districts and universities, utilizing the methods

and instruments developed by the project. There are also centers in Australia, Canada, and Germany using the NASSP format. In turn, these organizations contribute to the NASSP's ongoing assessment center research and improvement efforts.

In addition to the NASSP model, some school districts and universities are employing independently developed assessment center programs and activities (Griffin and Barry, 1986). If survey results are indicative (see Figure I), most assessment centers have been in operation for less than five years.

Figure I

Length of Time Respondents' Assessment Centers Have Been in Existence



Assessment centers are also being tested in higher education settings. According to Erlandson et al (1986), Colorado State University, the University of Utah, Loyola University, and Western Michigan University are following in the footsteps of Alverno College in Wisconsin, which was the forerunner in applying assessment center techniques to program development for its students.

## Purposes of Assessment Centers in Education

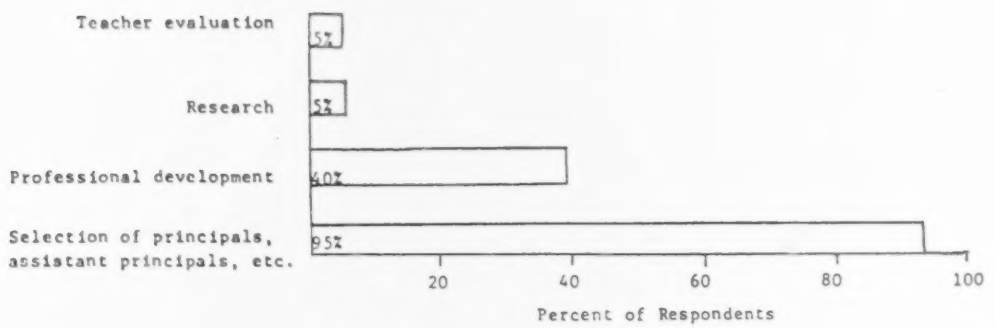
No one instrument can accurately predict human behavior. Using a variety of tools in an appropriate and effective manner can provide a more comprehensive profile of administrative candidates (Millward and Pinsky, 1980). The cumulative evidence provided by vitas and paper and pencil tests can yield significant information regarding a candidate's knowledge of content and concepts. Personal interviews can reveal important personality traits. However, none of these approaches provide sufficient information about the likely behavior of an individual in specific job situations. The assessment center approach allows for increased objectivity in the placement process, which has historically been a problem in selection of educational administrators (Johnson and Douglas, 1984).

The exercises used in assessment centers are designed to reveal behavioral strengths and weaknesses. Assessment centers are used for selection, placement, and promotion of administrators, specification of their professional development plans, and has the potential for use in the identification of

candidates and the design of pre-service administrator training programs. Selection has been the major emphasis, but professional development and pre-service training programs are a logical extension of the implementation of assessment centers (Nichols and Hudson 1986). Present uses, based upon survey responses are represented in Figure II below.

Figure II

Purposes of Present Assessment Centers
as Reported by Survey Respondents




Skill Areas Included in Assessment Centers

The first step in the assessment center process is the identification of specific skills about which employing agencies want candidate information. Providing such information about candidates through implementation of an assessment center is a decision that requires a sense of commitment of resources and time if success is to be realized (Lepard, 1986).

In order for assessment centers to provide useful data, certain job related skills have to be identified. At this time, the most widely used assessment center tools for measuring school administrators' effectiveness are those developed by the NASSP Assessment Center Project. They are based on twelve identified dimensions of a school administrator's role: problem analysis; judgment; organizational ability; decisiveness; leadership; sensitivity; stress tolerance; oral communication; written communication; range of interest; personal motivation; and educational values. Other inventories of educational administrative skills range in number from ten to thirty-three and appear to be variations of several basic skill areas (Millward and Wallace, 1986).

By including each skill dimension in a variety of exercises, assessors can gain multiple observations. Ogawa and Oxaal (1986) and Millward and Wallace (1986) suggest that the skill dimensions used may be divided into several broad skill areas, which can result in even greater purposeful duplication of skill testing. The NASSP model uses six to eight exercises, depending on the preferences of participating centers. The activities may include such events as written in-basket exercises, leaderless group discussions, interviews, simulations, schedule making, case studies, management games, paper and pencil tests, fact finding, staged staff meetings, public speaking, and negotiations. A careful consideration of the skills required for a specific job will dictate the actual activities to be employed.

## General Procedures

The process candidates encounter in the assessment activities varies from center to center. However, according to survey responses, in general, the following elements are included:

1) Assessees meet with assessors for a period of one to four days, with two days being most frequent;

2) The most common ratio of assessors to assessees appears to be 1:2. However, some centers have reported using a 1:1 or a 1:3 ratio;

3) A structured personal interview is usually incorporated into the process. Some centers include social or less structured settings for the interaction of assessors and assessees, but these are not usually directly included in the evaluation;

4) In most centers, assessors observe assessees and then meet to agree on ratings. At the end of the session, the assessors meet to synthesize a complete report for each assessee. This report, which addresses the strengths and weaknesses observed in each activity, is usually discussed with the assessee by the director of the center at the end of the session. This may depend upon the number of assessees, activities used and type and number of reports generated;

5) To conduct the center activities and evaluate the outcomes, assessors need three to seven days, depending upon the number of assessees, activities used and type and number of reports generated;

6) Other considerations in the assessment center process include: selecting a facility that is centrally located, has adequate space, and is in proximity to lodging and restaurant facilities; providing adequate support personnel to prepare the reports; arranging for the assessors and assessees to be away from their jobs (most centers take place during the school year); and forwarding evaluations to the initiating body, usually a school district (Wendel and Sybouts, undated).

## Assessor Qualities

One of the most vital elements in the success and validity of the assessment center is the training and subsequent

performance of the assessors. The training program for NASSP's Assessment Center Project has identified a profile of potentially successful assessors: eight to fifteen years experience as a school-based administrator; expressed commitment to the assessment center process; higher than average energy level; and high regard by peers. Other attributes valuable to assessors are observation skills, accurate and complete note taking habits, and ability to write clear reports. If these qualities exist in the assessors and appropriate activities are selected and administered in a proper manner, the probability of valid evaluations is enhanced.

Validation of Administrator Assessment Centers in Education

The NASSP, which has been involved in applications of assessment centers in educational settings for more than ten years, has initiated extensive multi-year studies to measure such things as internal validity. The studies also examined correlations between ratings on assessment center skills and later job performance as well as on school climate. These studies, based on the NASSP model, generated extensive data.

1. **Internal Validity**. A high interrater agreement about candidates' skills was found. Differences among the various skills assessed are meaningful.

2. **Skill Ratings and Job Performance**. Positive relationships between assessment skill ratings and later job performance were found. Highest and most consistent significant relationships occurred with performance ratings by superiors. Lower relationships were found with ratings by teachers and support staff.

3. **Skill Ratings and School Climate.** A significant relationship was found between student ratings of climate and administrators' skill ratings. Teacher and support staff perceptions of climate were not as highly related to skill ratings and most were not statistically significant.

4. **Performance Tasks and Skill Correlations.** Data indicate that assessment center exercises provided the information that they had been developed to measure (Schmitt, Noe, Meritt, et al, undated)

Gomez and Stephenson's (1987) study also concluded that assessment centers provide a selection tool for educational administrators that has predictive validity. However, in their extensive overview of the assessment center process, Wendel and Sybouts (undated) caution that the validity and effectiveness of the model is significantly influenced by the quality and quantity of assessor training.

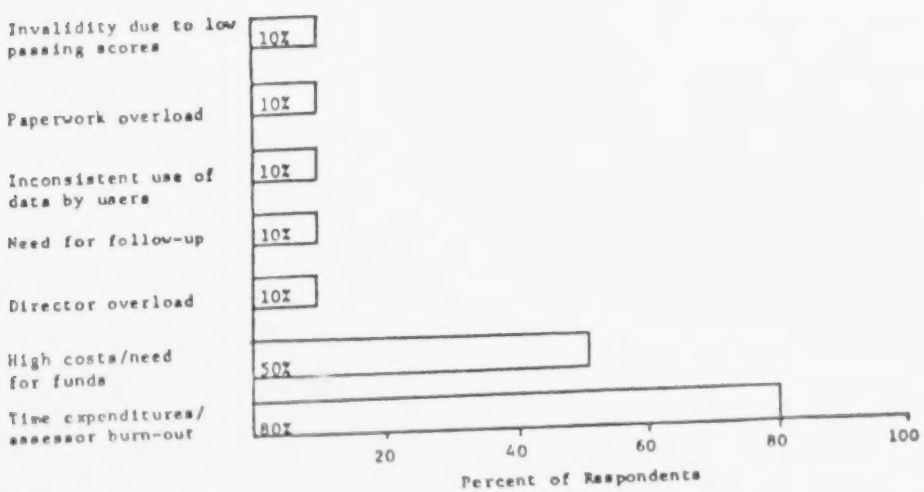
Constraints on Implementation of Assessment Centers

The high cost of personnel, both in time and money is cited as the most prevailing problem in assessment center implementation (see Figure III). Costs include salaries for center directors and support personnel, support for travel and accommodations, materials, and salaries for substitutes if centers are run during working hours. Per assessee costs of $1,500 to $2,500 have been reported by centers using the NASSP model. While assessors are not paid (other than their regular salaries) for the assessment, absence from their jobs and the training they require are responsible for a significant portion of costs. Due to the expensive and time consuming nature of

this training, there is a tendency to use a limited number of assessors. This, in turn, can result in assessor burn-out, which is also often reported as a serious problem (Figure III).

Figure III

Difficulties in Implementation as Reported by Survey Respondents




Cohen (1980) justifies these high costs in terms of high returns in the forms of appropriate placements and reduced turnover. Hogan and Zenke (1986) also conclude that assessment center activities yield extensive and accurate information when

analyzed on a dollar value basis. The problems noted above lead to some important policy-related questions:

1. Due to its time consuming nature and costliness, will the use of assessment centers expand? If so, where will the funds come from in a resource-poor organizational sector?

2. Will the use of assessment centers be limited to more affluent districts and larger organizations because of expenses involved?

3. Where will well trained assessors come from if assessment centers are implemented on a a large scale?

4. How will standardization and quality of independent centers be assessed?

It should be noted that costs can be reduced if assessment centers could be conducted during the summer. For example, costs for substitute personnel would be totally eliminated. Also schools could be used, thereby eliminating or minimizing both facility and travel costs.

The time consuming nature of the assesment process, as well as the evaluation of data, are also widely reported as problems (Figure III). Reduction of implementation and evaluation time could be made possible through increased use of support personnel and computerization of appropriate aspects of evaluation scoring.

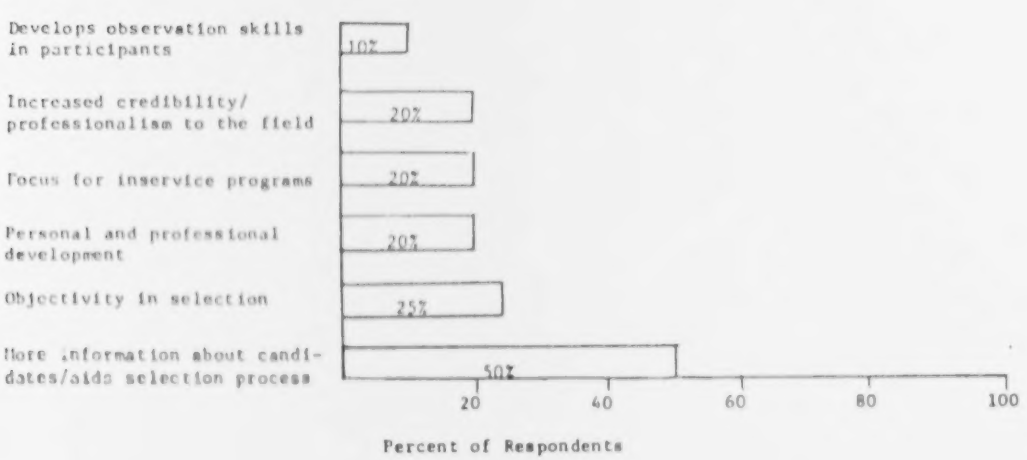
Farmer (1986) lists a number of cautions to be noted when implementing assessment centers, including appropriate use of assessment center results in the selection process and commitment to the process by the sponsoring organization. These same cautions were identified by survey respondents.

## Additional Applications of Assessment Centers

Assessment centers, according to survey respondents, have value beyond placement. Survey responses (see Figure IV) as well as the literature indicate that participating in an assessment center also allows assessees and assessors feedback to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses which can, in turn, lead to professional growth and development (Landholm, 1986). These data can provide a focus for inservice programs. Another effect of participating in the assessment center process, both for assessors and assessees (Loacker, 1986) is an improved level of observation skills, which is a valuable asset to educational leaders. Finally, they add credibility to administration as a profession. The additional benefits which can be realized from implementation of an assessment center should be included in evaluation of the costs and efficiency of the model.

Figure IV

Possible Uses of Assessment Centers
Reported by Survey Respondents



Wendel (1987) has also noted similar applications for assessment centers. He especially emphasizes applications for professional development. For example, based on the information generated from assessments, universities and school districts can provide individualized plans for specific candidates seeking positions in educational administration. Prescriptive programs can be developed for those scoring lower than required in skill areas or, if appropriate, a shift of emphasis from knowledge to performance can be implemented in professional development programs.

As assessment center tools become more refined, their uses can be expanded further. For example, assessment centers can be used to improve teacher evaluation (Millward and Wellins, 1987), certification programs and standardization of skill expectations from school district to school district, and to improve superintendent selection and evaluation activities (Joines, 1986).

## Summary

The assessment center is a tool used to identify job related behavior proficiency. It was originally developed by military organizations for officer selection and later adopted by the civilian branch of government and by business for the purpose of improving selection at the management level. Educational institutions became interested in applying this method of selection of administrators during the 1970's, with the NASSP taking the lead in developing, implementing and evaluating assessment center programs

Today there are more than fifty NASSP sanctioned centers, and a growing number of independent assessment centers in operation in education. The major focus of these assessment centers is selection of administrators. However, a number of other applications, such as professional development, are being explored. Limited research indicates that assessment centers generate a significant amount of valuable information about candidates and have an acceptable level of validity.

Problems in implementing the model include high cost, high time expenditure, great skill and energy demands upon assessors, and lack of or improper use of data generated. The potential pay-offs, in the form of individual development, better in-service programs, greater emphasis on skill development in preparatory programs for educational administrators, reduced bias in hiring practices, and increased professionalism of the field, in addition to improved candidate selection, make it well worth the efforts to overcome problems that are being encountered.

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